



Basingstoke and Old Basing U3A

Creative Writing Group

2025 Anthology

WINTER TALES

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WINTER WARMER

By Diane Hope

I always enjoyed writing and had several short stories published many years ago. Now retired I am writing again and love the support and encouragement I get from my U3A Writing Group.

I hear Sadie coming downstairs, so put the kettle on for our morning cuppa. It's been almost a year since she moved in, and I can't imagine living without her now. She caused quite a stir when she moved next door, arriving last November in a flurry of snow, nagging removal men and shooing inquisitive children, layers of bright clothes flapping around her slight frame like the exotic plumage of some tropical bird.

Some neighbours viewed her with suspicion. 'Her lift doesn't go all the way to the top floor,' said Mrs Daniels, after an encounter in the village shop. Children called her 'the witch lady.' She seemed unconcerned and soon became a familiar sight, with her flowing silver hair, bohemian clothes, and assorted bracelets that jangled as she walked. One bitterly cold day, I saw her struggling with heavy bags, and when I went to help, she invited me in for a thank-you coffee.

Her tiny living room was crammed with old books, plants, and assorted China ornaments. Sofas and chairs were festooned with cushions and throws, yet everything blended together and, despite the cold weather and no fire in the grate, there was a sumptuous feeling of warmth and comfort.

'You have a wonderful eye for colour,' I told her.

'Thank you,' she said, her face lighting up with a smile. 'I'm an artist. Would you like to see my work?'

I said I would and followed her up the rickety stairs. A former front bedroom was now a studio, with an easel by the window beside a table loaded with paints, brushes and rags, and several canvases stacked against the wall.

'They're amazing,' I said, as I studied each one. 'Such vivid colours. Do you sell them?'

'Oh, yes. Only the one downstairs is not for sale.'

I couldn't remember this picture, but when we returned to her cosy living room, I looked closely at the painting above the empty fireplace. It was an explosion of reds and oranges and yellows, spiralling from a molten core, like a magnificent sunset. I'd never seen anything like it before. The colours were so bright I found myself squinting, and I could swear there was heat emanating from the painting.

'It's just like looking at the sun,' I said.

'I call it Winter Warmer,' said Sadie. 'The best central heating system ever.'

The warmth in the room was surely from the late winter sunshine pouring through the window, but I played along with my quirky neighbour with a smile and a wink.

A few nights later, I was woken by a loud knocking on my door. Living alone, this was alarming, but when I recognised Sadie's voice, I grabbed my dressing gown and went downstairs. I opened the door to find her draped in a patchwork quilt, her feet bare.

‘My goodness, whatever, is it?’ I gasped, but before she could reply, there was a roaring sound and we watched in horror as Sadie’s house burst into flames. Sparks and long fingers of fire leapt into the night sky, like some gigantic firework display.

People began spilling onto the street.

Bertie Taylor from No. 6, his gardening jacket over his pyjamas, shouted, ‘I’ve called the fire brigade.’

Soon we heard sirens blaring as fire engines arrived and sprayed fountains of water onto the burning building until at last the blaze was under control.

One of the firefighters approached us. ‘I’m Fire Chief Jenkins,’ he said. ‘Was anyone inside?’

‘No,’ said Sadie. ‘I live alone.’

‘Any idea how it started?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she said. ‘I know exactly.’

The fire chief looked pleased.

‘I used the wrong red,’ she said.

‘Sorry?’

‘I should have used alizarin, but I went for cadmium. It was so very cold, and I wanted to make it as hot as possible.’

The fire chief’s smile faded, replaced with a look of concern. ‘You’ve had a terrible ordeal,’ he said, gently taking her arm. ‘Is there anywhere you can stay?’

‘She can stay with me,’ I said. ‘I have a spare bed.’

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘I’ll come back tomorrow, when you’re more yourself,’ and satisfied he had done all he could, he returned to his crew.

‘Come inside, Sadie,’ I said. ‘There’s nothing more you can do here.’

I ushered her into the house and provided slippers and a mug of tea. She looked so tiny, huddled under her blanket, as if the fire had extinguished her spark and shrivelled her up too.

‘You can stay as long as you like,’ I said, to reassure her.

‘I should have known the paint was too thick,’ she said. ‘It’s all my own fault.’

‘Don’t worry about that now,’ I said, helping her upstairs, resolving to ring the doctor in the morning.

When I returned to bed, my old bones felt decidedly weary, but sleep wouldn’t come. The shadow of bare branches danced an eerie waltz across the walls, and I couldn’t get Sadie’s words out of my mind. What nonsense, I thought. The picture couldn’t be responsible...could it?

The next day, I cooked Sadie breakfast. It was nice to feel useful again. We had several visitors. Neighbours offering assistance, Fire Chief Jenkins, and then the doctor. Sadie was still saying odd things. Her insistence that her painting had started the fire received sympathetic glances. She was obviously in shock.

‘Place was full of turps and old oily rags,’ one neighbour remarked. ‘No wonder it went up as it did.’

Indeed, Chief Jenkins mentioned the quantities of flammable materials identified in the remains. It seemed the likely explanation. The doctor was concerned that Sadie couldn’t continue to live alone and that we should contact Social Services.

When the last visitor had gone, I prepared the evening meal. The butcher had brought two lovely pork chops, and Mrs Porter had made an apple pie. 'This is a treat for me too,' I said. 'Mealtimes can be miserable when you're on your own.'

We soon settled into a comfortable routine. She was a wonderful companion, so I was delighted for her to stay. A much better solution than Social Services for Sadie and for me.

As winter turned to Spring, we worked together in the garden, and in the summer we enjoyed going for walks. I was happier than I'd been since my George died. But as the nights began to turn chilly, I started to worry about the heating bills. Our small pensions barely covered essentials. Then I noticed a closing down sale in the craft shop. It gave me an idea. I walked in and made my selection.

When I got home, Sadie was sitting in the garden wrapped in a blanket, enjoying the last rays of autumn sunshine. 'You'll be needing these,' I said, tipping out the contents of my bag. There was a canvas, some brushes and lots of tubes of paint, fiery reds, vivid oranges and bright yellows. 'We'll be needing another Winter Warmer,' I said.

BAD SANTA

Ross Thompson-Cooley



I have been a member of the Creative Writing Group for at least one year which I have enjoyed very much. I rediscovered my passion for writing during an Open University course. This led me to u3a which has given me an outlet for my work.

It was the season of goodwill and a time for world peace. I stared at the tall well decorated natural Mountain Pine tree that stood in the corner of the room next to the curved stairwell. Sitting at the Security reception, watching the angelic white landscape through the CCTV system, I thought about the workers who normally occupied this now empty building. Who, at this very moment were recklessly consuming vast amounts of alcohol and festive food.

A few feet away from me sat my supervisor. His generosity in covering for those who wanted time with their families had I thought, been tempered with the double time for doing nothing but being there. But I realised that I too was counting the extra pennies that would arrive in my bank account in January.

He was reading a newspaper, absorbing the news to pass the time. I with my umpteenth cup of coffee from the staff restaurant vending machine, idled the time away in a book for a distance learning course that I was undertaking. No patrols to do for another hour, the empty building would have to await my presence. The compulsory observations of the outside world through the eyes of the cameras seemed unfulfilling and the fire alarm panel seemed to be dormant. Even fire itself was enjoying a well-deserved rest. It was then that this 'world peace' was so suddenly shattered.

There amidst the sea of white, a family, mother father and a small child were approaching a taller mound of the heaven-sent yet cold joy amidst the flatness of the whitened grounds outside of the

building. The presence of a sled being pulled by the child alerted my supervisor to a developing situation.

The family group were throwing snowballs at each other. And the child was gesturing towards this mound of seasonal weather and pulling the small sled in its direction. A perfectly natural scene in view of the traditional wish for snow at Christmas. The child was laughing, creating a memory that would form its very being.

‘You’ll have to ask them to leave, they are on our property.’

Thanks! I thought, I got to be the bad guy in this season of goodwill. I nodded, putting my cup of coffee down, reluctantly donning my blue jacket with SECURITY written in bold letters on the back.

I swallowed deeply, feeling like a real killjoy, but what could I do?

The supervisor watched as I made my way to the locked off double doors from the reception area. He pushed the button and the doors opened. I furtively set off, hoping for a reprieve from this odious task. The crisp snow crunching under the weight of my boots, my radio in my hand. Approaching, I paused briefly, the family scene had unfolded into a time of happiness, where unique bonds were being formed.

As I approached, the parents turned to look at me. ‘Good afternoon, I’m part of the security team guarding this site.’

The child had also become aware of my presence. My official uniform and grim face changed his expression from a happy one to a sad one. His bead-like eyes seemed to sink into his now saddened face.

‘This is private property, and I have to ask you to leave immediately.’ The words seem to come from someone else, a much colder and uncaring person. Not even double time could reconcile me to this destruction.

The laughter stopped and all the joy ceased. And from that moment on, I was the wicked man who had ‘stolen Christmas’ and plucked the joy from a Childs innocent eye, forever tainting the joy of the season.

An intimate family gathering had become a scene of sadness and I, the kill joy watched as they gathered up their sled and took the child by the hand and headed away from the seasonal card scene.

The family seemed to look down, the child turning once to survey the winter landscape, before heading with his parents back to road. The security log read.

‘Three persons requested to leave the site.’

What should have been written was.

‘A child’s memory of Christmas was blighted for ever.’

I felt sad as I found myself staring at the CCTV screen, the once happy memory gone, leaving an empty whiteness once again.

The Camera showed the family walking slowly away. And just when I thought that I had shattered their happiness, the mother turned and pointed to our building, mouthing silent words and the child’s face lit up, laughing and dancing along the deeply covered pavement.

I had not ruined the beauty of this time for this family. I felt a huge sigh of relief welling up from deep inside of me.

I was happy to be the grumpy person who I imagined was now the centre of a family Christmas story which would be talked of for many years to come.

AFTER DARK

By Jemima Nielsen



I find creative writing both soothing and exciting, therapeutic and challenging. Usually written in a single sitting and barely revised I often forget them as quickly. I am a mother of 3 adult children. Keen on knitting, artwork and reading are great escapes!

“Three, two, one! Wahey! Into November!” The hard blackness from every surface swelled and sucked into the shelf of essences. The fake blood followed him and everyone began to breathe again.

“Well, that’s me too. So much for the proper me! He may have hundreds of adaptations but I have an entire name swap. I’m ‘the creature’ in the book as she wrote me, but adaptations, every ridiculous version, mixes ‘creator’ with ‘created’. Well, I’ve done my scary stuff for haunting Halloween and I will return to join my fellow serious texts”. Brought out and then returned to base every October. The original titles. Gone.

The clammy damp of darkness was vaguely lit by the blip, blip, blip of the alarm system and the street light outside.

“I’m not looking forward to the music.”

“It’s ok, I’ve overridden the system to play traditional Christmas carols. So much scope that few will get repeated. So much more tasteful.”

As the whisper of the soundtrack on the way to Christmas purred, the floor-plan emerged from beneath the counter. Every shelf and table was included, even the turning stand of calendars.

On the tables, which every shopper had to wend their way round, were the eye-catching, newly published. Hardbacks, fresh off the press. Winter tales for winter times.

Across the floor, there were the characters going on a bear hunt, attracting the children deep into the den of old and new.

“Let’s do things our way.” Peter Pan said as he drifted down.

Books for children have long been usurped by pictures. Illustration rules now. Delightful, but without the words to lead them on, into the written text where there is only imagination.

So, a lovely box opened and spilled stories of rabbits mischievous, escaping the Gardner, of daft ducks and nut-cracking squirrels.

A setup of snow and snowmen and Santas. Father Christmas swears grumpily and with gusto, but parents still read his tales, secretly enjoying his profanity and seeing it in a child’s sheer delight.

Witches scattered stars and rode brooms across the ceiling. There were editions of classics newly minted, illustrated by artists or photographers from film adaptations. Never as good as the originals.

“Why am I wasted on children’s shelves where I’m never appreciated?” Jane Eyre sighed.

“Well, at least you’re not a translation,” bit back Pippy Longstocking, out of character.

Arguments broke out, but Harry Potter fantasies eventually spun with The Famous Five and Secret Seven, Swallows and Amazons, and Black Beauty. Noddy in disgrace.

“We remain better known in translation and with Hergé’s true drawings, the text, a skilful reworking. Few children know the very first incarnations. Tintin, Snowy and the buffoon Captain Haddock.”

The adult areas arranged new stories with older books. Tried and tested. New tales from celebrities, spies, romances, political memoirs, perhaps written by a ghost. Titles reflecting this year’s favourites. After Boxing Day, all these weighty hardbacks will be offered at huge discounts but it’s so much nicer to be given on Christmas Day. Few readers will actually begin reading during feasting, jigsaws, and replays of war films and westerns on the television.

These books cheekily shuffled themselves like a pack of cards, deeper into the shop. The pierced and exotic staff arrived early. Lights on. Stopped. Stunned. At the centre, there was a Christmas tree playfully

festooned with rainbows of tinsel, bows, strings of light. A star at the top to lead people, as once it had led the wise men and shepherds.

The music begins to play and the three members of staff whoop, laugh and dance around the books like children. People who find the time to read. Nothing had stayed the same. This year is a reworking, work for young and old. Of course, the staff and shoppers never saw the creatures, real and magical which conjured dreams and delight.

Time to open the doors.



CHRISTMAS TIME, MISANTHROPE AND RHYME

By Lynn Clement

I have been writing since 2014. I enjoy writing flash fiction and short stories, occasionally dabbling with poetry. I have a book published by Chapeltown Books: *The City of Stories*.

Old Jacob Marley is on the door
There’s not even a carpet on the floor
The heating is off, no logs on the fire
A bucket of water thrown on the choir
This is the home of a mean old man
To make life hell, he does all he can
Mr Scrooge his name, he hates other folk
No Christmas crackers with silly jokes
No turkey or pudding, in this house
He lives as poor as the little church mouse
He won’t even give his nephew a treat
Or play his games in case he gets beat
It’s Christmas time but he doesn’t care
He still makes sure his workers are there

Slaving away for all they’re worth
Right to the hour of the saviour’s birth
But - this man’s life is about to change
When he’s visited by ghosts, he’ll be deranged
All that he knows and believes will go
He’ll see some nightmares and then he’ll know
How hated he is by all people round
He made them like that with his cruelty unbound
He’ll see that his past was to blame for his life
And be shown how his future is so full of strife
His present is hopeful - if he does the right thing
He might be made welcome and asked to sing
And make merry and dine and drink with his own
But he’s done some bad stuff, and now must atone

He must make amends and correct his bad deeds
He will be punished if he doesn't heed
The ghosts make him see that he must help Tim
And to feed his family ... they're all so thin
To keep them warm by the hottest hearth
Then show them how to make Tim laugh
Can he do all this in one fateful night?
Or will the ghosts give a terrible fright?
He wakes in a sweat with his clothes awry
He now knows that several good tasks he must try
He accepts, he's been given a chance
In his slippers and cap, he begins to dance
He orders up turkey and presents galore

He says, "Happy day," several times and more
Tiny Tim's family have a great dinner
Scrooge begins to feel like a winner
He visits his family and he's made at home
He gives them all presents and he's not alone
The Christmas spirits have changed this man
He's kinder and thoughtful - so away they all ran
He was lucky they came, or his life would be sad
He never was grateful for the joys he had
But now he is happy and others are too
He was glad of his dreams and he knows they were true
He shouts in the snow and we all hear his call
Merry Christmas to you, that's to one and to all

WHETHER THE WEATHER

A HOT TODDY

By Lynn Clement

The wind is coming tonight, the flashwall stated in a flat tone. Ellery assumed even AI was fed up with the same thing day after day. Last night it had been, *the rain is coming tomorrow*. And of course it came. The weather predictor was always correct. Everything was now always correct. Boredom was a fact of life.

The rain gauge attached to the foodroom wall, measured 150ml – another 150 to go before the rain stopped.

Ellery hoped that the soak in the community space would drain. They hadn't seen Noakes the drain-clearing droid for a while. They studied the community space monitor on the flashwall.

The little red boat was still in its mooring and its roof was intact.

They nodded at the weather monitor and selected - speed of the wind for tomorrow. *One hundred*, it said.

Mmm, thought Ellery, *I'd better check the moorings*.

Ellery hadn't been outside for some time and decided to physically check the boat, rather than use the AI. They knew they wouldn't meet anyone else. Most people stayed in their pods during the rains, operating buttons for their every need.

They stood inside the capsule wardrobe and selected rain. Suitable clothing was put on them. They slid down the outside chute labelled, 'boat'.

Ellery hit the dockside with a bump. The floating pontoon was a lot higher than the computer setting realized. They would have to adjust that when back in their pod. The pontoon bobbed about in the already swollen moat. The rain pattered on the metal boards. Ellery slipped and slid towards the edge of the pontoon.

‘Hey, what are you doing?’ The voice came from the P.A. system built into the wall of the pod.

It was a masculine voice, not AI. Ellery hadn’t heard one of them for a while. There weren’t many cis men around nowadays.

‘You - why are you out of your pod?’ the voice questioned in a demanding tone.

Ellery didn’t answer, they were too busy clinging on to the boat which they had now slammed up against.

‘I’m coming down, stay there,’ said the masculine voice.

Ellery thought, *definitely not a robot*, they’re not stupid enough to say — ‘Stay there!’

A figure clad in yellow rain wear quickly approached them.

He’s staying upright. They felt their feminine hormones surging.

The man pulled Ellery up by their arms and held them in a bear hug. He walked towards the suckchute and waved his hand. The weather-guard swooshed open. Still holding Ellery tightly, he stood inside the chute.

‘New sucker-boots,’ he said to Ellery, as they looked at his feet. ‘Maybe you need to get some.’

‘Do they do them in pink?’ Ellery asked looking for the man’s eyes.

‘A question you’ll have to ask your dresser,’ he said. Putting Ellery down, he held out his gloved hand.

‘Gormond,’ he said.

‘How delightfully old-fashioned of you,’ said Ellery, taking his hand.

The chute sucked and threw them forward towards the man’s chest. He smelled good. Musk and lavender mix. Their favourite.

‘Ellery,’ they said, ‘we’re pleased to meet you.’

‘I’m the new pod-keeper,’ announced the man, removing his visored helmet. ‘The droid croaked it.’ He laughed, a throaty, attractive laugh.

Ellery smiled. *This was a handsome man*, they thought, *straight nose, clear skin and piercing blue eyes. One of us could be tempted.*

‘Do you do sex on a first meet?’ asked Ellery.

‘I do anything you want, I’m an android, employed by the B Pod Federation to keep its employees safe and happy — oh — and also clean the drains,’ he added, with a giggle.

Ellery smirked. *Not a bad way to spend a wet day*, they thought, hoping for a few more rainy days to come.



LOOKING INTO THE NEW YEAR

Joan Weineck

I have always loved writing. I enjoy playing with words , mainly through poetry.

No parties this year? But time I fear,
To countdown each ticking revolution
That fades every new resolution.

Go to the gym, get nice and trim,
3 times a week?, Just take a peek
At shops in town, visits soon down
Ok let's say, get fit another way,
Long dog walk at least twice a day
But, too wet, too dark, no park, no pet!
Can't take a hike, get on your bike!
Feel you need to train, again and again
For summer's Big Wheel, should be no big
deal.
Tyres keep going flat, and that's the end of
that!
Let's save the planet with a dietary change,
Choose food from a far more restricted range,
So „January becomes Veganuary, You're so"
hungry !"
Plants you never knew existed cannot be
resisted!
Not long till, Give me a break, I need a steak!

No need to dine with wine, sleep like a log?
Lose that tum? No tots of gin or rum
But craving eat choecs more like a hog.
Just keep what you need? But it just seems to
breed
As sorting through, emotions start to brew,
It brings you joy, was your child's first toy,
Why ever did I buy? ...Memories fly by
A pile grows high, too good for a dump, skip
or even a charity shop trip.

Cleared a drawer and spirits soar, but the
whole chest?
No. I need a rest!
My plans all seem feeble, what matters to me?
In this year of the 21st?
What should come first?
Family, friends, neighbours near or those I
cannot see.
My, 'Better me bubble',so easily burst,
I'll have time to spare, to care,
Make special moments,
Spend time with those who matter most



A WINTER'S JOURNEY

By Cathy Foster

I am a founder member of the Writing Group. I enjoy the sharing aspect of the Group and helping others to develop. Recently I have achieved success in some local writing competitions, especially with Flash Fiction and sonnets.

I closed my laptop and left the cocoon of my home office. Picking up my Cath Kidston overnight bag, I headed for the hall. There I found my mother pacing up and down like a soldier on guard duty. Her eyes bored into my bag.

‘You don’t seriously think you’re still going? You won’t have seen what it’s like out there stuck in your study.’

With that she flung open the front door. I was greeted by an arctic blast which almost blew me off my feet. Outside everything was covered in snow with a pregnant grey sky threatening more to come. I had to admit that I could see what Mum meant.

But then I pictured Granny alone in her rocking chair for Christmas. My conscience told me I still needed to fetch her.

‘I must go,’ I said. ‘I can’t bear to think of poor Granny spending Christmas all alone.’

‘But Granny couldn’t bear anything to happen to you. Remember she lost her brother Roland driving in conditions like this. She won’t forgive herself if...’

‘I’ll be careful,’ I said, keys in one hand and bag in the other.

Nelly protested several times as I turned the key in the ignition. Was my trusty Nissan Note echoing Mum’s concerns about the journey? But eventually she spluttered into life, and I was able to generate enough heat to clear the windows. ‘Off we go then,’ I told her, with my overnight bag safely in the boot. I waved at Mum; her face lined with worry.

I decided to complete most of the journey on motorways. Thankfully the traffic was taking it steadily and avoiding unnecessary overtaking. So I made progress with the knot in my stomach relaxing a little, at least until I reached the exit for Gran’s village.

As Nelly and I chugged along the increasingly twisty and turny dark roads, the hairs on the back of my neck began to prickle. What had I done? I felt tears beginning to fall, mirroring the snowflakes landing on the bonnet. Why was I so stubborn? Why didn’t I listen? Gripping extra hard on to the steering wheel I kept myself going by imagining the taste of the steaming beef hotpot which Granny would doubtless have waited for me.

I turned the radio up loud. ‘Driving home for Christmas’ boomed out.

The windscreen wipers beat furiously. Soon I found the snow was obscuring my vision. The road vanished beneath a white carpet, and the wheels began to skid. I was losing control. I thought about Mum’s words and hoped she hadn’t phoned Granny and sparked off memories of her brother’s accident.

I realised that there was no choice but to pull over and take stock. Watching the near blizzard conditions outside, I comforted my insides with some of the emergency flask of tea provided by Mum.

The road was deserted. It made me shiver. I checked my mobile. No signal. No houses. No people. Mum and Gran would be desperate with worry. After fortifying myself with the last drop of tea, I decided there was no option but to walk to Gran's. I hoped from all the family holidays here I could remember the way.

I changed into my boots, zipped up my coat and tied my scarf as tight as possible around my neck. Still shivering, I crunched my way through the snow. The ghostly trees dripped with white. An owl fluttered and the falling snow made the grass move. I pulled my scarf tighter. My deep breaths puffed out into the night sky.

As time elapsed, my fingers and toes became numb. Was this frostbite? I felt like Captain Oates facing his fate, especially when next moment I skidded onto my bottom.

I don't believe, but in that moment of desperation sent up a prayer. Maybe God was listening, because before I knew it, I was dazzled by the headlights of an approaching car. It drew to a halt. My heart thudded. Lifts from strangers and all that. But what choice was there ...?

I looked in amusement at my rescuer as he helped me into the passenger seat. He was dressed in a grey flannel suit and skinny tie, topped by a trilby.

Was he on his way home from an amateur dramatic group, or a fancy dress party? He certainly wasn't dressed for driving in the current conditions. He looked a bit like one of those detectives from the TV programmes Mum watches on BBC 1 player.

He was driving a classic Morris Minor, very appropriate for his image, but not at all practical.

'I know her,' he said when I gave him Gran's name and address. 'Lovely lady. My name is Roly by the way.' With that he shook my hand. How old fashioned, maybe I will be safe with this man.

I was amazed how easily he started the ancient car and drove through the snow. When I commented on this, he merely remarked, 'they don't make cars like this now.' Pride in the car was etched on his face.

I crossed my fingers, hoping that it would get us to Gran's. My tummy was rumbling for her hotpot. Before I knew it Roly was helping me out of the car and carrying my holdall to the door. He shook my hand again but declined my offer of warming up inside with a cup of Yorkshire tea. Neither would he accept money towards petrol. Before I knew it, he had disappeared into the wrath of the blizzard.

The cottage door flew open and forgetting her frailties Gran pulled me inside. The door slammed shut. The first things that hit me were the aroma of the longed-for hotpot and that Gran's face looked blotchy and tear stained.

I clasped her soft, knobbly hand and walked her to the front room in silence. Then I sat her on the weathered brown sofa, placed an arm on her shoulder and tuned to face her. A smile broke out on her face.

'I've been so worried, Sarah. I can't believe you've made it safely in this. I haven't known a storm this bad for almost sixty years, since ...'

'I know, it was much worse than I realised when I left Mum's. If I hadn't been rescued by a wonderful gentleman, I wouldn't have made it. He knows you apparently.'

I was surprised to find Gran's smile wilted. 'Oh, who was it?'

Was my rescuer an undesirable? Someone she didn't like.

'Very old fashioned,' I began. 'Looked like he belonged to an amateur dramatic group. Or had come from a fancy dress party. He said his name was Roly Penny-something.'

Gran's face fell. 'Roland, you say?'

Well, Roly, yes.' I nodded.

She put a shaking hand to her mouth. A tear appeared at the corner of her eye.

'What's up?' I asked, holding her other hand.

'My brother Roland Pennyfeather died in the big storm of eighty-six. They found him frozen to death in his Morris Minor.



A WINTER'S TALE

By Marie Ford

I have always like writing stories. One of my favourite moments is when I read back something I've written and wonder where on earth the words came from!

December 29th 1965

Dear Grandad.

Thank you for my new pen and writing set you gave me for Christmas, and the Spirograph set. I've done a big Spirograph pattern on a piece of card for you, and will be very careful filling my pen with the bottle of ink. Dad has given me a piece of pink blotting paper which I have put behind the writing paper so I don't lose it. I have put the set of Jacks I had in my stocking in one of your empty Gold Block tobacco tins from your bureau, so I don't lose them.

Mum has put the gold helicopter decoration I chose off your tree onto our Christmas tree until she packs the decorations away. It's next to the Mickey Mouse I picked last year. I love having something from your tree and bringing it home. When I have children, I hope they love my Christmas tree, like I do yours.

Mum has hidden the mint toffees you gave us from your brass golfing bowl because I keep sneaking one without asking.

I am having a party in May for my 13th birthday. I hope you can come.

See you soon

Lots and lots and lots and lots of love

Marie

P.S. I hope I can caddy for you again next time we come to visit. It's lots of fun but a long walk. The other day Mum showed me of photo of when I was little and holding one of your golf clubs.

P.P.S. Lots of love again

Marie

December 1st 2025

Dear Grandad

This is a heavenly letter to you. I found the one I sent you sixty years ago folded up in your wallet which Mum had kept when you died, and I found the wallet after she died on Boxing Day in 2014. I have kept your wallet with my Christmas decorations and this morning I carefully unfolded the fragile aged paper covered in the tiny writing I used to do. I know the words by heart so my declining eyesight isn't an issue. I think I've inherited your eye problems.

I can't believe forty-seven years have passed since I last held your hand in the hospital, and almost eleven years since I held mum's on that Boxing Day morning she came home to you.

The Christmas tree is now up with the help of your great granddaughter Joanne and the gold-coloured helicopter still has pride of place next to Mickey Mouse. Both have been in the wars over the years. The rotor blades of the helicopter were chewed by a puppy about twenty-five years ago, but that just means it has more special meaning.

I've painted new eyes on Mickey Mouse to replace the felt ones that fell off. Both ornaments seem happy with their superior status on the tree.

I'm a grandma now with ten grandchildren and one great granddaughter. Next May, a new great grandchild will join the family. I wonder if the baby will arrive on my birthday like I did on my dad's? Each grandchild learnt the requirement of touching my nose as the button to let them down when I held them, just like my children did, and I did with you. It's strange, thinking about it now, I can still feel your arms around me and smell your Gold Block pipe tobacco, just as if it all happened moments ago. That sparkle in your eyes embedded your love deep into my heart. Nothing has ever felt as safe as that.

On Christmas Eve I will fill your golfing bowl with mint toffees. Mum kept it for years on her mantelpiece. I wonder which year you were awarded the bowl from the golf club? One of my sons and my grandsons play golf now and know you were a scratch player. I wish you had all known each other. The bowl of toffees will sit on the bureau, just like it did in your house. Yes, I also have the bureau now. I keep important papers and all my art things in it. The green baize felt is still intact, still holds your finger touch, still holds mine.

While sorting through mum's things I found the Spirograph pattern I made you back in 1965. It's now framed and hangs on the wall in my bedroom. I remember the tension of trying not to make a mistake when I made it, and the relief when it was finished. I'm glad it has survived this long thanks to you and mum keeping it safe.

Today I hung a stained-glass robin below a photo on the wall in the living room. It's actually two photos in a frame, one of you just about to tee off at Lickey Hills golf club and the other is of me, aged about three, holding one of your clubs.

You would have been one hundred and twenty-one on August 25th. To me you are still the white-haired gentle man who was perfect in my eyes. I still eat Princess marshmallows when I can find them, one pink and then one white, one for me and one for you, just like we did in your garage when I helped mend things with you. I occasionally buy Fry's chocolate cream bars, your favourite, when I see them in shops and give them to my grandchildren. I don't put sugar on my lettuce like you did though!

Oh Grandad, what I would give to touch your nose one more time and get a whiff of pipe tobacco from your cardigan while you gave me a whisky rub with your unshaven cheeks. For as long as I live, and my children live, and their children live, you will always be.

Lots and lots and lots and lots of love

Marie

P.S. My children and grandchildren loved dancing on my feet like I did on yours. Now my great granddaughter loves my magic button nose and dancing balanced on my toes.

P.P.S. Lots of love again

Marie



A CHRISTMAS TALE

By Lynette Moss

Formerly a GP in Popley. Second passion restoring sight with ophthalmologist husband in the third world. Rotary fellow, school governor, medical diarist

It was going to be the best Christmas ever. We had had some trials and tribulations throughout the year.

Our older daughter had had a challenging adolescence and some very difficult things to deal with but to our surprise she had just sat the Oxford entrance exam and joyfully had been excepted 3 days before. Relatives were coming from far away. I had made the Christmas cake and pudding and the turkey was sitting majestically in the back room.

I had one more surgery to do that Christmas eve before finishing and hosting what I hoped would be a great Christmas party.

I was in my room seeing a patient when the phone. It was my husband.

‘I will be on the surgical ward this afternoon’ he said.

‘No worries’ I replied ‘what time are you likely to be home?’

‘No I am going to be the patient’ he said.

‘Whatever do you mean’ I exclaimed

It turned out unbeknown to me he had had a biopsy for cancer the week before and urgent surgery was now advised. I sat back in shock. Unseen by me the patient crept out and told the receptionist. I had collapsed [not quite true] Ten minutes later one of my partners arrived and told me to go home. I went straight to the hospital to the operating theatre to find a Christmas eve lunch party in full swing. Alcohol and laughter was all around with much jollity. Very alarmed I found the surgeon due to operate later on my husband and he reassured me he had not touched a drop. My husband was in pre-op and quite drowsy.

I went home to find some rather disgruntled relatives rather cheesed off to arrive to a cold house and no welcome. Soon they were as alarmed as much as I was. That night I went back up to the hospital to find an almost empty ward with only the sound of a sweet choir singing Christmas carols softly somewhere in the distance. David was fast asleep but woke up at one point to drink the glass of pink mouth wash on his bedside BEFORE I COULD STOP HIM.

The next morning my younger daughter excitedly gave me a beautiful tapestry she had been working on secretly for weeks. It was framed all in black though and most unfortunately, and disappointingly for her, it made me more upset than happy. It was a lovely surprise even though and she had put so much effort in to it in her sweet way.

We went up to the ward about 10am to find David quite distressed.

‘For God’s sake get me out of here ‘ he said. ‘I have had 9 visitors already’ It seemed everyone who worked in the hospital had been to see him.

The nurses and I were reluctant to let him take his own discharge. He had a drip up for a start but there was no refusing him. Home he came.

Daily we went back to change the drip but within 3 days he was pruning apple trees and managed to catch the drip on a branch.

When Christmas was over one day I rang the path lab for the results. The news was not good. As I put the phone down I heard someone say in the background

‘that is his wife you fool’.

There was no radiotherapy that would help his cancer or chemo. It was a win or lose situation. We sat rather in fear and trembling for the next few months. Every time he got a headache or backache I thought secondaries but he was actually ok. Determined not to be miserable I went out and bought a gorgeous red TR7 and we had a lot of fun with it.

As more time went by the cancer threat was slowly forgotten.

Was it the best Christmas ever? I don’t think so.



THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

By Guy Caplin

Since retiring I have concentrated on my writing. I have written and published a series of seven spy novels on Amazon all remarkably unsuccessful; nevertheless, I am undeterred.

The Great Detective had always been a curmudgeon, where high days and holidays were concerned: he failed to acknowledge their existence. I hoped, since his mind was no longer preoccupied with solving the crimes that had baffled the brightest brains within Scotland Yard, his attitude might have changed. It was not to be. Having retired and moved to the sleepy market town of Basingstoke, he ignored the social niceties.

My late wife and I had always celebrated Christmas in style, and despite my companion’s indifference, I was determined to do the same.

As I pinned the brightly coloured Advent calendar to the wall, he sneered. ‘My dear Doctor, I can’t believe that you subscribe to this annual superstitious nonsense.’

Before I could think of a suitable riposte, the sound of a hansom cab stopping outside in the cobbled street drew my friend to the window. 'Good Heavens,' the Great Detective exclaimed. 'What on earth is young Pettigrew of the local constabulary doing on a frosty morning here in Basingstoke?'

We didn't have to wait long before our landlady, Mrs Hudsmith, admitted the slim young man to our upstairs apartment.

'I am glad to see you,' said my friend. 'You always bring me a criminal case to tax the intellect.'

The Great Detective opened his leather pouch and began filling his pipe with the foul mixture of tobacco and herbs he habitually smoked.

'I hope you don't mind my visiting,' said the young man. 'But an interesting crime has come up locally. I would welcome your advice from both a criminal and medical point of view. The case concerns the death of a young woman, Elspeth Deane, the wife of Basil Deane, the squire of Upper Basing. Her body was found yesterday by a chimney sweep that the husband had arranged to call. The front door was unlocked, and the man found Mrs Deane had been stabbed. The husband had been away for over a week with his brother in Southampton and returned home shortly after the sweep.'

'And what worries you about this case?' asked my friend.

'Gossip has it that the husband married the woman for her considerable wealth. Neighbours saw the woman go out in a hansom four days ago, so the death must have occurred since then,' said Pettigrew.

'And?' enquired my friend.

'Gentlemen, I've seen a dead body or two in my time, and this doesn't look like a recent death to me.'

The detective puffed on his pipe. 'What does the attending doctor say?'

'He agrees with me but says medically there's no way of accurately determining the time of the woman's death.'

Pettigrew left, and the Great Man sat in his chair by the window, deep in thought. As the hours passed, I began writing up my journal as I had done in the past, documenting all of the Great Detective's cases. I looked up to see my friend rolling up his copy of the Gazette and swatting a fly against the window pane. He stood and studied the corpse.

'Eureka,' he muttered. 'Doctor, how long does it take for a housefly's egg to hatch and develop into an adult?'

'I honestly wouldn't have a clue,' I replied, perplexed at his bizarre question.

'Me, neither, but don't you think it is time we found out? Could I borrow your surgical instruments?'

'Go ahead. Please don't return them covered in blood like you did last time.'

The Great Detective grabbed my bag and disappeared into the night.

Unusually, the following morning, he had risen before me and sat at the table, his eye glued to his microscope. Beside him, his notebook lay open with a drawing of a larva, and he was in the process of inscribing a series of measurements beside its segmented body. I became aware of an unpleasant smell. Two dead rabbits lay on the windowsill.

'Please don't touch, Doctor.'

I brushed away an insect, hovering over the corpses.

'And don't disturb the flies,' he added. 'They need to do their work today.'

'What on earth is going on?' I asked.

‘If my theory is right, we will know in about twelve days.’

He enlightened me no further. Every day, the smell from the rabbits became worse. and the influx of flies became intolerable. Meticulously, he extracted samples from the decaying corpses and scrutinised them under his microscope, making detailed drawings and measurements on his notepad.

Day after day, the stench from the rotting corpses and the invasive hordes of insects increased, while my friend remained indifferent, absorbed by his task.

On Christmas Eve, as I braved the unwholesome atmosphere and swatted the flies from my breakfast, I noted it was the twelfth day since the case had dominated the Great Detective’s brain. As ever, he was poised over his microscope. A snort issued from his lips, and his face broke into a smile. ‘My dear doctor, you may care to take a look at this.’

He proudly showed me a couple of drawings. ‘This larva I extracted from the body of Elspeth Deane on the day after her death, and this larva I extracted from a rabbit this morning, exactly twelve days after its death.

‘But they look the same,’ I said.

‘Exactly. This brilliant discovery of mine proves the woman died at least twelve days before she was discovered, when her husband was at home.’

I remembered Pettigrew’s conversation. ‘But didn’t neighbours see her a few days before the husband returned?’

‘People may have seen a woman in Elspeth’s clothes, but it can’t have been her: the science proves the woman was dead at that time. I’ll wager that the squire of Upper Basing committed the murder and has a mistress or lady friend accomplice. This astonishing breakthrough will completely revolutionise the art of the post-mortem. Well, what have you got to say about my brilliant scientific discovery? It must rank amongst the greatest achievements of the age. It should qualify me for a knighthood or even a peerage. I will go down in the annals of history.’

I brushed away half a dozen flies that had settled on my moustache. ‘It’s Christmas Eve. Do you think now we can get rid of these stinking rabbits?’



A TALE OF WINTER

JANUARY 1963

By Michael Luck

I’ve always loved writing. It suits me as I live in a dream world half the time anyway. This piece is very loosely based on my father, Bob Luck. In December 2025 it will be fifty years since he died.

At just before 4am, Robert slipped out of bed, careful not to wake his wife. This was his daily routine, Monday to Saturday. He didn’t need the alarm clock and invariably unset it by 3.55am. His years in the Army had given him an infallible body clock. He padded downstairs, shivering. His clothes were already in the armchair in the kitchen. Everything was prepared so that the children and his wife would not be disturbed. The boiler in the kitchen was still alight, just. He stoked it with a shovelful of coke.

The children would not appreciate cold water to wash in before school. He looked outside. It had snowed. No surprise. Snow had been falling since Boxing Day. This was a very bad winter, the worst since 1947. He could see another few inches had fallen in the night. There were still occasional flurries. The car, his pride and joy, was still snowed in. He'd have to walk round to the yard. He dressed quickly and splashed some water on his face. He slipped his notebook into an inside pocket. That would be needed later. Coat, hat and boots on, he opened the door. 23 degrees Fahrenheit was showing on the thermometer in the porch outside.

The frozen snow crunched underfoot as he set off for the yard. There was silence all around apart from his own footsteps. Robert was the part owner of Black Horse Transport, started by his father in the 1920s. Robert had returned from Army service in World War Two in 1946 and found the country on its knees. Rationing was worse than during the war. His father had given up running the business in wartime and had drunk the company bank balance away nightly in the Fox and Hounds during the dark days of the Blitz. Motor fuel was in short supply after the war, but Robert was able to get commercial coupons for the company and restart the business. All the local greengrocers found it difficult to get to the wholesale Borough Market at London Bridge every day because of fuel rationing, but Robert took a lorry to the market and bought produce on their behalf. One lorry instead of a dozen or more small vans. On a Saturday he collected the bills from all the grateful greengrocers before they got to the pub. Sometimes he would be sitting in the Dog and Bull waiting for the stall holders to show up. He added a little commission for the service and each client received a handwritten account taken from his notebook. The greengrocers of the area were grateful – they could stay in bed for another couple of hours while Robert delivered their stock to them. He'd been doing this for seventeen years. Now that the Prime Minister had declared 'We've never had it so good', the clients could afford their own transport, but they preferred their bed to going to market, and Robert and his brother Ernie profited from this sideline. Ernie ran the business with him and allocated the other jobs to the half dozen drivers as they came in. But the market run was Robert's.

He trudged down the avenue, over the railway bridge and round the corner into the yard. He had to avoid the frozen puddles – he'd seen a few people this winter go over and break a wrist or worse, and he couldn't afford to be out of action, with five children and a wife to feed. The cold hurt his ears – he'd lost the hat with flaps on and only had his old Army beret.

At the yard he saw an immediate problem. The lorry he liked to drive was in place, but it was a diesel, and diesel fuel 'waxed' in these unprecedented cold temperatures. The little paraffin greenhouse heater that he left on the ground beneath the tank, keeping it warm, was missing, presumed stolen. That meant the lorry wouldn't start because the diesel wouldn't flow. He made a quick decision and took one of the older petrol lorries. Petrol was immune to waxing.

He scribbled a note to Ernie about the missing heater. Once in the cab he started up and nosed out cautiously out into the icy streets. This winter he had taught himself winter driving, a complete contrast to the desert driving he'd enjoyed – when not being shot at – in the war. 'Pussyfooting' the accelerator and brakes, and correcting the occasional slight skid. He drove the hills of London – South Norwood Hill, Herne Hill, Denmark Hill, passing Crystal Palace Park on the way. On through the Elephant and Castle, enjoying the deserted frozen streets. Finally, he parked up at the edge of the covered part of Borough Market, under London Bridge station. The market was a bustling hub even at 5.30 on a winter's morning. Market porters hurried back and forth, and Robert was able to exchange an early greeting to some of those he knew.

He walked past the tailboard of his truck. A head suddenly appeared over it. ‘Oi, Robert mate, where are we? What time is it?’

‘Blimey Alfie what are you doing in the back of my lorry? Have you been there all night? You’re lucky you didn’t freeze to death. We ain’t in the desert now. Wait a minute... you didn’t put my heater in the back did you? You’re lucky it didn’t tip over and set the whole shebang on fire.’

‘No mate, I made sure it didn’t. I slept on a pile of sacks in the back. Anyway, you said, when we got demobbed, if I ever needed a job to come and see you. I didn’t know where your house was, but I looked up the business in the phone book. And here I am. Where am I, incidentally?’

‘You’ll make a good driver if you don’t even know where you are.’ Robert chuckled. ‘You’re a Manchester boy. You’ll need to get yourself an A to Z and start learning the streets. I get my breakfast at Antonio’s Café over there and then get loading. I’ll buy you an egg and bacon breakfast and cup of tea. Come on – oh and turn that heater off before you jump out.’



Borough Market Circa 1960